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NEW YORK (AP) - The federal government could be liable for $215 million if it is ordered to pay $1;000 to each American whose mail was opened by the CIA as part of a long-term domestic spying program.
On Wednesday; three U.S. citizens who had filed an invasion of privacy suit because their mail to and from the Soviet Union was opened by the Central Intelligence Agency; were awarded $1;000. The federal government also was ordered to write letters of apology to the plaintiffs. The government said it had not decided whether to appeal the decision.
Judge Jack B. Weinstein; who issued the order; said ''at least 215;000 pieces of mail'' were opened by the CIA between 1955 and 1973. Among those whose mail was read were the late author John Steinbeck and Sen. Frank Church; D-Idaho.
''The existence of a court system capable of protecting the rights to privacy by granting money damages and other relief against the government and its agents makes our Constitution and laws consequential to our citizens rather than pretentious empty promises;'' Weinstein wrote in a 57-page decision.
The case; the first arising from CIA mail surveillance; involved Norman Birnbaum; a sociology professor at Amherst College; Mary R. MacMillen; placement coordinator at Northeastern University in Boston; and Leonard Avery; a Minneapolis advertising executive.
Birnbaum; whose letter to a Soviet professor was opened; sued for $50;000 in damages. Avery; whose letter from a son studying in Moscow was opened; sued for $20;000. And the third plaintiff; whose ''very personal'' letter to a correspondent in the Soviet Union was opened; sought $20;000.
A jury last May 12 deliberated for nine hours; then recommended damages ranging from $2;500 to $10;000.
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